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Creation and evaluation of the tourist image of a country - the example of Poland

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Abstract

The increasing globalization of the contemporary tourism economy is the cause, due to which, for many countries that want to be competitive on the international tourism market, the creation of a positive tourist image of the country and building a strong national brand is a major challenge. The article will examine the organizational side of Polish tourism promotion system, evaluate the existing tourist image of the country and indicate the main problems in the creation of the tourism image of the country and building the national brand. The main research method used in the paper is a case study. A complementary method is the analysis of existing data, including a review of scientific literature and studies of documents published by institutions and organizations dealing with the promotion of Poland. The results of study showed that Poland still does not have a distinctive, coherent and attractive tourist image abroad. In this area, however, many positive changes occur that should be promoted on the international market.

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Introduction

In connection with the development of mutual relationships between countries, building a recognizable image and a strong national brand is becoming an important way of presenting the country's own values, and thus the method to improve the competitive position internationally. Countries increasingly refer to the management tools used by enterprises to improve their position in the territorial market. Brand building and its management is one of

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the most important areas where countries adopt business models (Hereźniak, 2011). National branding is a phenomenon which refers to the activity of state institutions at the central and local level as well as public and private entities undertaken to develop and communicate the competitive advantages of the country (Hereźniak, 2011). A feature of national branding is a strategic approach to building its image (country image) in the international market. Such activities are now a permanent part of foreign policy and the object of conscious regulation and concern for government authorities. This is largely due to globalization and increasing competition, which favour the perception of individual countries as megabrands in need of effective promotion in order to present them adequately to tourists, investors and politicians (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000, cit. in Gorbaniuk, Radman, 2011). Anholt (2006) notes that "tourism is often a major stakeholder of a national brand promotion because tourism promotion is generally the only way in which countries consciously use their marketing abroad." Tourism can be an opportunity to create a good opinion about the country and interest of many potential visitors, such as tourists or investors (Łuczak, 2012). Image held by people is likely to affect their decisions concerning the selection of the country as a place of tourist destination, a place of residence or a place to run economic activity (Kotler, Gertner, 2002). Gorbaniuk and Radman (2011) write that associations with the country are subject to changes, thus they may be the object of intentional action aimed at modifying the country's image towards the intention of the entity/entities.

Interest of scientists in the concept of the image already appeared in the '60s of the twentieth century. The first researcher dealing with this issue was Boulding (1956), who suggested that image can have a greater impact on human behaviour than objective information about perceived objects or environment. The application of the concept of the image to places and research in this area began as early as the '70s of the twentieth century among representatives of different disciplines (Gallarza et al., 2002). The subject of most research have become tourist images of countries, known as destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

The most frequently cited presentation of destination image are definitions by Crompton (1979) and Kotler et al. (1993), according to which the image is the sum of all beliefs, ideas and impressions that people associate with a destination. Kotler et al. (1999) furthermore add that images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a destination. They are a product of mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) made the conceptualization of the image of tourist destinations. According to their opinion destination image could be considered in terms of both an attribute-based component and a holistic component. In addition, some images of destinations could be based upon directly observable or measurable characteristics (e.g scenery, attractions), while others could be based on more abstract, intangible characteristics (e.g friendliness, safety). Therefore, as Echtner and Ritchie write (1993), the notion of functional and psychological characteristics, could be applied to destination images. Thus, studying the image of tourist destinations, the authors emphasize that it must be treated as a mental "construction", consisting of two dimensions: cognitive and emotional (Hosany et. al., 2006; Smoleński, 2010). The cognitive element includes beliefs and knowledge about the physical properties of the place, while the emotional component refers to feelings and emotions associated with more abstract characteristics of the place (Hosany et. al., 2006). Gartner (1993) and Pike et al. (2004) to these two dimensions add another one – conative. The conative aspect of destination image is the behavioural manifestation from the tourists' side and can be understood as onsite consumptive behaviours. The conative element of destination image is influenced by both the cognitive and affective components (Stepchenkova, Morrison, 2008).

Development of the image of a tourist destination is based on the consumer's rationality and emotionality, and is the result of the combination of those two main components (Gartner, 1993; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Destination image is formed from several sources of information: immediate experience, media messages and intentional promotional activities carried out by the network of entities involved in the process of building the image of the country (Gorbaniuk, Radman, 2011). Early and more recent research provides evidence that the image of a place influences tourist decisions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza et al. 2002, Zhang et. al, 2014). Due the complex character of destinations, developing and sustaining a place brand (also place image) requires special marketing solutions. Destination marketing activities are generally performed by the destination marketing organizations along with other entities concerned with tourism and regional development (Johann, 2014).

The aim of the paper is to examine the organizational side of Polish tourism promotion system, evaluate the existing tourist image of the country and indicate the main problems in the creation of the tourism image of the country and building the national brand.

1. Methodology

The main research method used in the study is a case study describing the system of tourism promotion and building the image of a specific country. A complementary method is the analysis of existing data (a desk research method), including a review of scientific literature and studies of documents and reports published by institutions and organizations dealing with the promotion of Poland, including the Polish Tourist Organisation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polish Brand Institute. The analysis of these materials has allowed to show the current perception of Poland as a tourist destination.

2. Results

2.1. The importance of tourism in Poland

Tourism is seen in Poland as one of the main channels of marketing communication, creating a national brand. In *Poland's marketing strategy in the tourism sector for the years 2012-2020 (Marketingowa..., 2011)* it is indicated that this is the strongest and most effective channel that the country currently has and will have in the coming years. Tourism is in fact of great importance in the national economy of the country. In 2013 the Polish tourism economy generated a 6.4% contribution to GDP and had more than 6% share in total exports (table 1) (Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki, 2013).

Table 1. The importance of the tourism economy in the years 2009-13

Index	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
The share of tourism in GDP (%)	5.2	5.2	4.8	6.0	6.4
The share of tourism in exports (%)	5.2	4.8	4.7	5.7	6.1
The share of tourism in imports (%)	2.6	2.9	1.7	2.1	2.6

Source: Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki, 2013.

In 2013, 15.8 million visitors came to Poland (including 9.85 million tourists from the EU) (Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki, 2014; Janczak, Patelak, 2014). The number of foreign tourists coming to the country may be so to speak a basic measure of the strength of the tourism image of the country (Nawrocka, 2009). Attractive image of the country often contributes to the choice of a particular country as a tourist destination.

2.2. Institutions and organizations engaged in tourism promotion and development of the image of Poland

The process of creating the image of the country is very complex and requires the commitment and cooperation of many different entities (both state institutions and organizations, local governments, tourism organizations and other public and private entities). One way to have an influence on the image of the country is tourism promotion. In Poland, the main entity responsible for the country's tourism promotion on domestic and foreign markets is the Polish Tourist Organisation (PTO), supervised by Ministry of Sport and Tourism.

Foreign Centres of the Polish Tourist Organisation play a special role in the promotion of Poland as an attractive tourist destination in the international market. They are established in countries very important and promising for the development of inbound tourism to Poland. Currently, the PTO has 13 such centres (Austria, Belgium, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Italy, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Japan, the USA) (Polska Organizacja Turystyczna, 2015).

The Polish Tourist Organisation cooperates with many other entities, including regional (RTO) and local tourist organizations (LTO). These entities, which are a form of public-private partnerships, deal with, inter alia,

stimulating the creation and development of tourism products in the regions and the promotion of their tourist values. Therefore, there is a three level system of organizations for tourism promotion in Poland: PTO-RTO-LTO, corresponding to organizational solutions used by many other European countries. Unfortunately, the functioning of the system faces in practice many barriers, especially at the local level there are financial barriers.

Many other institutions carry out activities aimed at promoting Poland and creating its image in the world. Among them the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomatic posts play a special role (which deals with general promotion of the country). The other include the Ministry of Economy (economic promotion of the country), the Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency (investment promotion), the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development, the National Chamber of Commerce (which established the Polish Brand Institute) or other entities, such as foundations (*Badania...*, 2011). This situation causes great dispersion of tasks and activities relating to the promotion, communication inconsistency, and also less efficient use of funds allocated for promotion. The actions of these entities often were carried out without a coherent idea and coordinated actions, there was lack of a common, unified concept for national promotion (Boruc, 2005), despite the fact that since 2004 the Council for the Promotion of Poland was established to coordinate promotional activities of the country, which is an interdepartmental advisory body to the Prime Minister.

Recognizing the need for unifying marketing communication in Poland, attempts were made to organize Poland's national marketing program, whose aim was to design, build and promote the brand of Poland. As the result of this work was cooperation established with a team of international consultants under the leadership of Olins (an expert in creating national brands), whose effect was defining the central idea of the brand Poland, expressed in the words "creative tension". This concept, however, was not fully implemented (Górski, 2013).

In developed countries, an active approach to building a coherent national brands is applied rather than passive promotion of selected aspects or areas (*Badanie...*, 2013). Following this trend in Poland, in 2013 there were developed *Rules for Communicating the POLSKA Brand* (2013) which consists of recommendations that all the institutions involved in promoting the brand POLSKA or making use of this brand should use. It is the first document defining a common framework for marketing communication of Poland, allowing to obtain synergies of messages carried out by different entities (increasing their strength and effectiveness of activities). In 2014 there was the first in Poland the country's image abroad campaign carried out "Polska. Spring Into New", based on new communication principles of the brand POLSKA (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2014).

2.3. Assessment of tourist image of Poland

The analysis of strategic documents concerning the promotion of Poland and various assessment reports of the brand of the country and its image as a tourist destination has revealed that Poland as a brand exists, but the brand is blurred, slightly distinctive and still weak. The target position of Poland defined in *Poland's marketing strategy in the tourism sector for the years 2012-2020* (*Marketingowa...*, 2011) is the top twenty of national brands. It is assessed, however, that Poland as a brand in many foreign markets does not have any image (it is not associated with anything), the image is only at the stage of formation. Where that image exists, Poland has dominant associations with the history (mostly related to World War II, the Holocaust, communism, 'Solidarity'), natural landscape and climate (variety of wildlife, a cold climate) and the famous Poles (Copernicus, Chopin, John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa) (*Badania...*, 2008; *Strategia...*, 2010). However, there is lack of associations with modern elements. Poland is seen among the foreigners primarily through the angle of the past and not the present (*Marka...*, 2004). According to international experts in the field of place branding conducted in 2011, the image of Poland is neither strong nor weak and rather mixed, though it is closer to a positive connotation (Florek, Janowska, 2012). In Europe, the overall image of Poland is unclear, and sometimes little positive. It focuses on traditionalism, economic backwardness and religiousness. The Poles are assessed most positively by residents of Portugal, France, Spain, Ukraine, and the least positively by the Netherlands, Austria and Germany. The previous studies of image also show that a much better and more distinctive is the image of Poles, than Poland itself (*Badanie...*, 2013).

Since Polish accession to the European Union, the country's image has undergone many positive changes (some of the negative stereotypes weakened or become obsolete, there are more and more positive associations), but it is still not attractive. The weak link of the image of Poland is primarily promotion (*Analiza...*, 2008). Poland, however, has great potential to build a good image internationally because its reality is better than the image. As Johann

(2014) states, Poland is not perceived as a typical tourist destination. The problem is the limited number of trips offers to Poland from foreign travel agencies. The change of the image and attracting more tourists requires much more effort put in the promotional activities adapted to the various markets.

The image of Poland is more positive among foreign tourists who have already visited this country. They are often very satisfied with the trip, willing to return and recommend a visit to their friends. As positive characteristics of Poland are listed: a unique, rich and interesting history, diversity of landscape, wildlife, monuments, Polish cuisine and food. The big advantage is also character and behaviour of Poles (seen as friendly, nice, sociable and hospitable, polite (*Badanie...*, 2013; Johan 2014). The biggest Polish tourist capital is its unique location (the gateway connecting the East with the West, the East Gate of the EU, the Heart of Europe – it should be used as a promotional or image value), people and cities (*Analiza...*, 2008, p. 64; Johann 2013). Brands of Polish cities (e.g. Gdańsk, Cracow) in many markets are stronger than the brand of the country as a whole, and therefore they should be used both for creating the image of tourism and national branding. Promotion of Wrocław as the European Capital of Culture in 2016 creates a great chance. Urban and cultural tourism were considered the most important characteristic of Poland's attractiveness in its target markets in the coming years. It is complemented by business tourism - conference and congress centres (MICE) (*Marketingowa...*, 2011).

Studies have shown that in creating the image of Poland abroad (also as a tourist destination), first of all a special role should be given to the human factor as one of the most important assets of the country's brand. Positive communication about Poland should be focused on positive qualities of Poles. The promotional communications should emphasize their entrepreneurship, creativity, hard work, imagination, charm, vitality, individuality, youth, beauty, dynamism and diversity (Johan, 2013). Tourist places and regions should be promoted by presenting experiences and emotions which tourists can experience in connection with the atmosphere of the place (*Strategia...*, 2010). This is in line with the main strategic thought in creating Poland as a brand, whose idea is "Poland Empowers" (new experiences, imagination, entrepreneurship and initiatives (*Rules...*, 2013). Also educational campaigns are needed among residents about the tourist attractiveness of the country as the opinions of Poles (including people of cultural distinction, politicians, media representatives, journalists, and local communities) have great potential in creating tourism image of the country and encouraging foreign tourists to arrive there.

Conclusions

In Poland, tourism is seen as an essential element in creating the image of a national brand, since the country has a big potential to build an attractive tourism image, especially in the European markets. In the process of creating the image of a national brand and the country's brand as a tourist destination, extensive cooperation of various institutions and organizations is needed and, above all, integration and coordination of their actions. Unfortunately, there is no institution in Poland which is involved in coordination of activities aimed at building a strong national brand (Johann, 2013).

In creating a positive (desired) tourism image of the country the Polish Tourist Organization plays a leading role. It is estimated, however, that despite many interesting promotional campaigns undertaken by the organization in recent years, Poland still does not have a distinctive, coherent and attractive tourism image abroad (*Badanie...*, 2013). Many positive changes are made in this regard, however, the change of the image is very complex and slow. Studies have shown that over the last decade the image of Poland has not changed too much. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of promotional activities.

The target tourism image of the country must be strong, expressive and unique; showing the country as an attractive and welcoming for tourists, having competitive tourist products of high quality. Such a image should contribute to the choice of the country as a tourist destination (*Marketingowa...*, 2011). In creating the image of the country in the coming years, an emphasis should be placed on people, their positive qualities and emotions (*Rules...*, 2013). They are considered one of the most important chief assets of Poland.

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